

A priest disappears

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 4, 2006 All Things Catholic

How attitudes around the world are changing towards clerical sexual abuse, and the struggles that remain, were both on display this week in the story of Salvatorian Fr. Joseph Henn and his disappearance from Rome ahead of an Italian extradition order.

In 2003, Henn was accused of sexually abusing three minor males while working in Phoenix between 1979 and 1981. When the charges surfaced, he was stationed at the order's Rome headquarters. Prosecutors in Maricopa County in Arizona sought extradition.

Henn denied the charges and resisted extradition, but decisions in two lower Italian courts went against him. During this time, Henn was under house arrest. The final blow came July 27, when Italy's high court again rejected his appeal and gave the Ministry of Justice 45 days to carry out the extradition.

In response, Henn fled. Salvatorian authorities issued a statement saying they are "surprised and saddened at the sudden disappearance."

The fact that three Italian courts ruled for extradition has been hailed as a sign that even in a country long deferential to the clergy, the legal system will no longer tolerate sexual abuse.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors' Network of Those Abused by Priests, told NCR July 28 that the Italian decision was a sign that "the ground is shifting."

On the other hand, Clohessy and others expressed dismay that the Salvatorians did not insist from the beginning that Henn return to the United States, and that now he has escaped their supervision.

As a footnote, while priests sought on charges of abuse have been extradited from other countries, a spokesperson for the U.S. bishops' conference told NCR July 28 that Henn's case would "apparently" have been the first time it happened in Italy. Observers see that as telling, given the strong influence of the church in Italian affairs.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org[1]

Links:

[1] <mailto:jallen@natcath.org>